

Families, an economic charge or a support for immigrants?

▪ Theoretical and political relevance

A social cost and benefit argument is always around the public debate on immigration. Despite the demand of non-skilled labour in most industrialised countries, new immigrants are often viewed as a potential economic charge in the medium-long term. Further, these fears are intensified because of the conviction of later links in the immigration chain –which will occur regardless the immigration policy¹- tend to be relatively unskilled. The rationale is the following: tied movers tend to be less skilled and less economically motivated than first movers are². Consequently, family reunion tends to lower the average skills' profile of immigrant groups and to increase the risk of poverty and welfare dependency.

Most studies on the labour market (socio-economic assimilation) of immigrants provide some empirical support to the mentioned fears, showing a substantial wage gap between immigrants and non-immigrants comparable workers and worst economic performance for immigrants entered under “non-economic categories”.

However, the literature on the economic assimilation of immigrants has important flaws that bias many of its conclusions. I will try to point out these flaws in order to highlight the relevance of my empirical question.

Considering the available evidence, several critical assessments should be made on the empirical study of immigrants' socio-economic position:

- It has been, almost exclusively, male-focused (women were assumed to migrate mostly under family-reunion provisions and to keep themselves out of the economic activity)³.

¹ As Borjas underlines “even if immigration policy (does) not specifically encourage chain immigration, economic factors are at work that would nevertheless generate this type of migration flow (Borjas, 1990: 177).

² Tied migrants are those people that migrate not because they found it worthwhile in economic terms, but because a relative has migrated before him/her. So, the tied movers' pool is expected to include some persons who are not as well suited for the labour market of the host country as first movers.

³ Many authors, both economists and sociologists, have recently pointed out that women's contribution to family earnings creation is crucial for immigrants. For instance, in Canada, the share of the family earnings contributed by women is larger in immigrant families than in non-immigrant families and the trend is toward a still greater role for the

- Consequently, it has been dominated by an individualistic orientation that prevents to consider "families/households" as the adequate analytical units. So, very few researches pay attention to how different patterns of cooperation and resource pooling among family members may make better the economic position of immigrants, generally trapped in low-wage jobs.
- As a consequence of using data official data (census-type), gains derived from multiple job holding and informal activity are never taken into consideration despite both are very common among immigrants.

The necessity of exploring these three interrelated issues and, especially, the family's role, to get an accurate view of the economic performance of immigrants at the receiving societies is evident. I think that, as the immigrants' flow consolidates and family reunion occurs, it has no sense to assess the economic stand individually because even if low-skilled joined family members can become an economic support for the immigrant household.

▪ **Empirical question: are tied movers an economic charge for immigrants?**

I would like to study the family's role in the economic integration of immigrants. For this goal, I will analyse the economic situation of different types of immigrant families/households, trying to connect their household structure and their economic stand.

According to their labour activity, immigrant families might be classified as follows:

1. A single bread-winner household
 - 1.1. Typical male bread-winner household
 - 1.2. Atypical female bread-winner household
2. More-than-one-earner household⁴
 - 2.1 Typical dual-earner household (both member of the couple working)

immigrant wife in the earnings creation of the family (Worswick, 1996: 392-393). Further, even when immigrant women are mainly housewives, they often earn a wage at home, working in the informal economy (Light, 2000: 135; Rajman and Tienda, 2000: 296). So a complete account of immigrants' economic standing has to include women's role.

⁴ Immigrant families' composition is very likely to differ from that of the native ones, since "family" means different things in different cultures. Further, the immigration policies and the type of jobs offered at the destination country will have an important role in determining the family migration pattern (the sequence of migration among the family members). Because of these all factors, the last type of household structure (2.2.) is likely to become very common among immigrant groups at the host country.

2.2 Atypical more-than-one-earner household (for instance, the father and some of the oldest children; the father, the mother and a sister of the mother, and so on).

Granted that immigrants are usually employed in low-wage jobs, I think that types with more than one person employed (3 and 4) are likely to perform better in economic terms, because such a structure allows to obtain an additional income and to diversify risks. So, I think that tied movers may improve the economic situation of immigrant households.

The issue has immediate policy implications: to know whether family migration improve the economic prospects of immigrants or not, or more exactly which types of families are more likely to help immigrants economically, is crucial to immigration policy design.

▪ **Research design**

In principle, I would analyse different national immigrant groups (Moroccans, Peruvians, Dominicans, Polish and Chinese, for instance) within the same country (Spain). In doing so, I will be able:

- To have enough variation in my dependent variable (household structure), as long as different nationalities tend to have different migration and family patterns.
- To control the contextual variables (like labour market, welfare benefit policies, immigration policy, etc.) influencing the family-reunion pattern and, consequently, the immigrant household structure.

In any case, the possibility to extend the research to more than one country and to analyse the role of those contextual factors is depending on the time and financial constraints. Both are expected to be high due to difficulties to obtain liable data on immigration. In fact, I will probably need to conduct my own survey⁵.

⁵ I have already explored the European Panel Household Survey, which includes foreign immigrants, but the sub-samples' size is not large enough to be liable.